



Twenty Years of Writing Workshop: A Conversation with Nancie Atwell

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There is a story about Nancie Atwell that we have often read to our students. It is an article called "The Prime of Ms. Nancie Atwell" and was published in the December 1984 issue of *Esquire*. The author of the article, Tom Quinn, calls Nancie the example of a great teacher. He relates a story Nancie told her students at Boothbay Region Elementary School. It's a story about a young girl from Buffalo, New York, whose life followed a different path than she had planned after she enrolled in a college course called "Survey of World Literature." When she realized she was in love with words, she became an English major and ultimately a teacher, researcher, author of the award-winning book *In The Middle*, and the founder of a K-8 demonstration school, the Center for Teaching and Learning in Edgecomb, Maine, where she now teaches writing, reading, and history.

First of all, Nancie Atwell is a reader and a writer. Many of us know a little about the path she followed from her years teaching eighth-grade students to also love words when she came "out from behind the big desk" to establish a workshop setting where students are expected to behave like writers and readers. We've read her books and articles, dog-eared favorite pages, making notes to ourselves, reading favorite passages out loud, and marveling at what adolescents can accomplish when a teacher with a knowledge of writing and of literature rejects impoverished models of literacy. We've heard her tell powerful stories that convey how well she knows her students, and we know that her work with reading and writing workshop has been a journey of trying, testing, discovering, and making changes. We've read and re-read her honest words that call into question the assumptions too often conveyed by a "status quo" approach to teaching English, and we have learned from her ongoing research about the value of a predictable structure, of clear expectations, of time



for students to read and write, to be responsible for the choices they make, and to learn from honest response. But we always want to hear more from her.

On a beautiful autumn day in Ohio, hundreds of teachers gathered to hear Nancie Atwell, the featured speaker for the 1999 OCTELA Fall Integrated Language Arts Conference. Their appreciation for what she has done, for what she said that day, for her willingness to tell her stories, and for her continuing influence and inspiration was evident in the standing ovation and prolonged applause she received. Prior to her speech, we had the privilege of talking with her. Her words convey what can happen when a teacher carefully considers the choices she makes — deliberate choices that make it possible for her students to become writers and readers. We had a wonderful conversation, and we are so grateful to her for the warmth and sincerity with which she shared her stories.

I think *OJELA* is the best state journal I've seen.

Thank you. We have enjoyed it so much and have grown in many ways. We are proud of the journal and appreciate your comment about it.

Do you think you'll continue as editors?

No. We've made a very conscious decision not to continue, and we have two terrific people who will be taking over editorship after this issue. We are so pleased that NCTE named one of our journals, the Winter/Spring 1999 issue, as the "Best Affiliate Journal of the Year," and has approved it for promotion with other NCTE publications. It will now have an even wider audience.

My students are crazy about Cormier's latest novel, *Heroes*, so they loved the interview with him that appeared in that issue. Two-thirds of my seventh- and eighth-grade group have read *Heroes*. It was great for them to be able to think about why he did what he did in the story, to hear him talking about his choices. I appreciated your sending it as a sample copy, because it was just the right one for us.

We will be happy to send more. It's so rewarding to know that your students are using it.

It has been over a decade since the first edition of In the Middle was published, and I don't think there's been another book that has struck teachers the way it has. I have always been so pleased that something a teacher wrote while looking back to her teaching and doing research with her classes won a research award, and has continued to have such an impact on so many inservice and preservice teachers. Now we have the wonderful new edition, and all your works that have been published between the two editions of In the Middle. As you look back, is there anything you would like to talk about as your perspective about teaching and learning continues to change? I know you see teaching and learning as something that is dynamic, and you've changed somewhat in your perspective about the teacher's role and how you work with students in reading and writing.

Every year I think I've reached some level of competence — I feel on top of my game as a teacher of writing and reading. Then, every year, I rethink much of what I'm doing, at some level. Yet basic philosophies stay constant. I was cleaning out a closet last summer and came across the original copy of the report that Don Graves sent to the National Institutes for Education at the end of his study of children's writing at Atkinson Academy. It must have been published around 1980. It was self-published in one of those plastic binders, mimeographed, with a green bond stock cover. It was incredible to think that this piece was the granddaddy of all of the work we're doing

now in K-12 classrooms that we call writing workshops. In the first few pages Don listed the seven hypotheses he'd reached as a result of his two-year study, and those principles still guide everything I do with kids: they must develop their own ideas; there has to be frequent and predictable time for writing, so kids can think and work as authors do; conferences are the best way to talk to kids about their writing because writing is so variable and idiosyncratic.

As Don said in the report, you can't teach writing until you've observed the writing and talked to the writer, which I think at the time was a freakish idea. We thought we could stand up front there and deliver information that was pertinent for everyone because writing was this monolithic, generalized activity.

So it was wonderful to look back over 20 years and to again realize that these theories are the bedrock on which I teach. But I also know that over 20 years I've become more hands-on and directive with student writers. In the beginning I needed to stand back and see what kids did when they wrote — to understand what it meant that writing was idiosyncratic and variable. And then it was time to step back in again. I think the stepping back in has become more powerful and complex and satisfying as I've become more experienced myself, including the experience of my own writing as well as reading what others have to say about theirs. I didn't start writing until I was 30. So I've had a lot to learn.

And I continue to look at what my kids are doing. I was talking to Frankie Sibberson last night about a student who has flummoxed me this fall. I haven't ever observed a seventh grader doing what he's doing as a writer. So I'll never know it all, even in terms of the kids. Each new class brings new concerns, the field keeps changing, you keep changing as a person and teacher, and, because you're teaching from your own experiences as a writer and reader, those keep changing, too.

So, I find it gets richer and richer, it never gets easier, and I'm always exhausted and ecstatic. There's a point in August when it starts, and I realize, "Oh my, I'm thinking about teaching: I will never have a free moment or peace of mind again until June." I am obsessed. And that's what keeps me in the classroom, and a lot of other teachers, too. It's that total giving over of one's self to thinking about the best thing to do next. What is the very best, most helpful thing to do tomorrow when I go into that classroom and meet with those kids?

I hear in your spoken voice the same quality of person that's in your written voice. It compels teachers to

connect to your work. You're so honest. You're honest about being tired, and being tired and worn out is sometimes part of teaching, often a part of teaching. Sometimes we want to push it away, but it's also what keeps us going. Carrying the children with you everywhere you go, I mean everywhere, is part of it.

Do you find that you can work at night any more? For example, editing student texts or lesson planning? If I try to do anything after eight, I'm either too tired to see straight or I'm awake all night thinking about it. So I find that I have completely changed the rhythms of when I do my prep work. I get up at five now and work before I go to school.

I want to come back to something you said about a seventh grader who has totally flummoxed you. What's this person doing?

I think it's important for teachers of adolescents to consider what books will begin to take kids into adult fiction.

He's trying to write a memoir about the day his dog died. But instead of writing the story, he listed facts about the dog, facts that go back and forth between past and present tense. It's not any genre, and it's certainly not a memoir. So I said, "Okay, let's talk about what happened the day your dog died. That's the story you want to tell in the second draft. Rather than listing facts about the dog, why don't you go back and write the story of that day?" He wrote a second draft and did exactly the same thing: he is my dog, he was 14, he liked to chase balls, he has a black coat. It was — I hate to characterize it as third-grade writing because I know a lot of third-grade writers who can put a lovely narrative together, and this boy just couldn't do it. So I asked him tell me the story again. This time I took dictation from him that gave him a rudimentary scaffold, just a page of notes, which I gave to him. He used these to construct the narrative, referring to the scaffold to keep him on track in terms of crafting the story. The memoir that he wrote is a charming, workable narrative. Now I wonder if he'll need that kind of conversation and scribing every time. Is there a way that I can teach him to do this kind of planning for himself, because he's obviously going to need some kind of visual cues? This is a child who may have language processing problems that nobody has spotted yet, and I need to be looking at why he's having this difficulty when writing.

Does he read?

Yes, he reads, follows plot, and can talk about

what's happened in a novel. So it's more a problem of producing written language.

I wonder if he were to do some of that drafting on sticky notes and physically move the pieces, the facts.

The problem is that what he had wasn't even pieces of a story. They were pieces of description and background information. Anyway, it'll be interesting and also worrisome. I have a lot to think about and learn.

It's important for teachers to hear how you carry him with you. As teachers we are drawn into the child's story.

I'll retell this story today in my speech. I added it yesterday on the plane thinking, "I need to talk about this. I need to process this out loud with teachers."

And I think your audience will do that. I think they'll take that child in as one of their own and think about what they might offer to you and to the learner.

Frankly, I was also thinking that I have many success stories in the speech — tons of samples of student writing and stories about the ways we talked and then how the writing changed. That's not always fair. Sometimes, when talking to other teachers, I need to say, "Here's the one where I'm not sure what to do. I'm confused, but I'm observing and thinking, and these are the approaches I'm considering and trying."

That's what I was thinking. Other teachers hearing your story will think, "Oh, that reminds me of how I felt about a particular student." I think we do need to hear it.

Isn't there a book that Heinemann or Stenhouse published of teachers' bloopers? I think Brenda Power edited it. It's a book of times when things went wrong, and I think we need to hear those stories, too.

Speaking of story, you obviously believe in the power of a story, and we've shared so many stories of the students in your school in your classroom. Do you ever tell your students stories about the teachers who come to hear about them and about your school and about your trip? Do you tell them stories about us?

My students are self-absorbed — wonderful, self-absorbed, young adolescents. They don't think twice about me except for how I touch their lives, nor should they. I could hold up a copy of *In the Middle* every day and say, "Look, I wrote a book that's sold a lot of copies," and they'd say, "Oh, you wrote a book, that's really nice, great. Now let me tell you about the movie I saw on the weekend." I'd hold up the book the next day, and they'd be just as surprised that I'd written it. Their interest in me coming to Ohio was limited to how big the plane would be. Would it be a prop engine? A 737? Then I heard 30 stories about the times they flew in a plane.

The only authority I have with students is my authority as a writer and reader. For example, in a recent mini-lesson I said, "Here's a poem I'm trying to write about my new dog, who I bought because she looks just like my beloved Springer who died." I worked on this poem with my kids — started it the first week of school and just finished it. It became a meditation on how you can't ever fall in love in the same way again, but you can fall in love. The second dog is horrible, but she's beautiful. She looks just like the old Springer, but she's bad. She runs away. She steals underwear and socks. She doesn't come when she's called. She refuses to be petted — she turns around and presents her bottom for people to scratch. She's an offensive character, but I've learned to adore her. You know, she's my dog. The symbol of the transformation in my feelings is her tail. The old Springer's tail hadn't been docked; she had this long plume that I loved. Rosie, on the other hand, has a typical stump of a tail. So the end of the poem is about loving the Rosie flag, when it's waving in the woods, and feeling that's my dog. This is the dog face I see now when I close my eyes.

So any authority that I have with kids comes from them seeing me work through the three drafts of this poem in front of them on overhead transparencies in mini-lessons — from understanding there was something that I wanted to write about, to figuring out what it was, to solving problems along the way, to trying to craft it as literature. What was the itch that was making me compare these two dogs? I even extended the lessons to brainstorming titles, which I did in a mini-lesson last Friday. I had brainstormed many, following Donald Murray's good advice, and I showed them my process. The title I came to is silly — it's "A Tale of Two Tails" — but it fits.

Now, when I sit down with students in conferences, any respect they have for my advice is going to be a result of the kinds of choices they saw me making. They saw how I generated lots of options and weighed them. They liked this poem, the way it turned out, and they saw how perfectly dreadful it was at the beginning, when I was trying to figure out what it was I wanted to say. They believe me now at some level when I say, "Writing is thinking. It's thinking, it's thinking, it's thinking, which is why you have to be quiet in here so people can think; which is why you need to draft double-spaced, so you have room on your paper to think; which is why we're going to learn these tricks that I'll show you in mini-lessons that writers use to be productive thinkers on paper." The last thing I want, as a writing teacher, is a student who's sitting there staring into space for 45 minutes "thinking,"

because I know that's not a productive use of time. What I want them to know is that there are ways to think on paper — to generate data, get the wheels turning, and then see what they've got. Many of my mini-lessons now involve writing in front of students. It's never the great American novel or the great American poem. Instead, it's the poem about my new dog compared to my old dog. It's showing them how I'm struggling to make sense of my life through writing, and how they might, too, and how the goal, always, is to make literature.

Are your students more willing to make changes and talk about the problems in their writing because you have done this working through your own writing with them?

I think it's one of the things that makes them willing to use the whole writing process as opposed to merely drafting pieces for the writing folder. We're also learning about how other writers have written. We look on overhead transparencies at what kids in the class have done. And we have conversations in conferences that are a big impetus to go back into their writing and rethink it. When I'm confused as a reader, or when they realize themselves that it's not there yet, and they say, "How can I get it to go there?" and I say, "Well, you could try this and this," it sends them back into the piece again in a thoughtful way. So I'm not saying things to kids like, "You have to revise. It's part of the writing process." I'm saying, "You have to meet your intentions. And you may not even know what they are yet, which is the exciting thing about writing. You figure out your intentions while you're writing, and you get closer and closer. And then you've written something that changes your life, and it changes the lives of people who read it."

What you have said is so powerful. And I keep thinking about what you have done and what you've said about how you began. I remember the wonderful little narrative published in Esquire in December 1984, an article called "The Prime of Ms. Nancie Atwell." It was about the high school girl who might grow up, get married, and live in a trailer. But your life was changed by literature. You were an English major, and then you were an English teacher whose focus was the teaching of literature.

I think that although at some point in my genesis as a writing teacher, "English teacher" was a label I wanted to reject, in the end my knowledge as an English teacher has made my teaching more powerful. For example, it's the reason I can teach Shakespeare to my kids, which is what I was doing this week in my reading lessons. We're reading *Hamlet* together, and the students are going to enact Tom Stoppard's "Fifteen Minute Hamlet." It's because I know some things

about literature that I can bring drama and poetry to the pot and make my students' experience of writing and literature deeper. When there are problems with writing workshop or reading workshop, it's sometimes because teachers don't feel confident in their backgrounds in poetry, drama, fiction, or memoir and can't talk with kids about powerful experiences they've had as readers or haven't figured out ways to make their experiences accessible to kids. We need to read, widely and passionately, and work to bring what we love of literature to our teaching.

How do you invite 13-year-olds to love Shakespeare? That's a real challenge, but I love him so much, and that's the first step. I build on that and begin to forge invitations.

You have talked about the authority you have with your students as coming from doing the writing you do. What I hear you saying now is you also have authority that comes from the passion for the literature. You trust yourself to invite children to the literature.

Yes. I certainly am an opinionated reader.

There are English teachers who would think, "Wonderful, Shakespeare's being taught." They wouldn't even consider that a young adult literature book could be in the same classroom. You use both.

Yes, so that the same week we were reading *Hamlet* and talking about what an attractive character he is, we're also looking at a range of young adult literature in the classroom library and talking about what makes other male main characters attractive to us as readers. That identification with and attraction to the main character is something that compels readers of literature. So we look across novels — at Cormier's books, or Richard Peck, Alden Carter, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. To my kids, Ponyboy Curtis in *The Outsiders* is just as compelling as *Hamlet*.

I love these books. I would recommend *I Am the Cheese* to anyone. I would recommend *The Last Safe Place on Earth* to anyone. There are so many phenomenal authors writing for kids today and writing so well. And there is so much adult fiction that serves as good transitional literature. *The Poisonwood Bible* has just come out in paperback, and it's going through the girls in my group like wildfire because they liked Barbara Kingsolver's other books, such as *The Bean Trees*, which are accessible to 12- and 13-year-old girls. In *Poisonwood Bible* they find the same accessibility but also a meaty topic about this clash of cultures — Western European culture and African. So while I champion Y.A. books, I think it's important for teachers of adolescents to consider which books will

begin to take kids into adult fiction. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* has been a big one for my kids, as well as Tim O'Brien's novels about Vietnam and Elizabeth Berg, Alice Hoffman, and Russell Banks' *The Rule of the Bone*. These are books written for adults that instruct my kids about the world they'll want to grow up into.

You have written that when you were teaching in a public school in Boothbay and the students had their individual reading choices, you told them, "Don't bring a book in that I would have trouble defending." Is that right?

Yes, and I still say that. If a work of literature reveals something important about the human experience, I'll fight to keep it.

I think that's the stand the teacher takes. There's still some responsibility then on both parts, but it's not just the teacher saying what is an acceptable list of books, and what is not.

Yes, and that begins with a teacher reading a lot. When we started the school — the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) — we began as a K-3 school and added a grade each year. I was full-time administration and didn't get back into teaching until 1994, with the first class of seventh graders. I thought, "Oh, no, I haven't taught adolescents since 1987. I have to run out now and discover what all the hot books are." Of course in the interim these awful horror series had emerged — Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine. I thought, "I guess this must be what kids are reading now," and I bought five of each to try. They sat on a shelf in my classroom until this summer. Not one was cracked open, I'm convinced because of the other things that were going on in the classroom. This summer I finally said, "I don't have room for these any more," put them in a box, and told the kids they were there, but nobody's interested.

I've had to make it my business to browse for and read books for my kids, and to make room for us to talk about them. The conversations about books are so rich, and there's so much trading, recommending, underground discussing, so many book talks, so many dialogues in reading journals. Kids crave literature that's going to show them something about their lives or the human experience. So it's encouraging to think that even when junk is available, if there's enough literature that feeds their souls and it's readily accessible, that's what they'll choose.

We both work with people who are preparing to teach, and we asked them to pose some questions for you. One question I find intriguing is, "What might prospective

teachers look for inside themselves to know that they have the potential to connect with children in middle school in a very real way?"

I think my sense of humor, which tends to be either sarcastic or pretty blatant, is really well suited to my students. Older kids are bored with or embarrassed for me, and younger kids don't get me. But there's a level at which I can be funny and relaxed in the middle school classroom, and it's appreciated.

I think another thing a potential middle school teacher might want to look for is a level of comfort with the unpredictable. Seventh and eighth graders are really unpredictable. It seems to me you can say freshmen are like this, sophomores are like this, juniors are this, and seniors are that, but seventh and eighth graders are everything. I have students who call me "Mom" as well as kids who come to school wearing the most incredible masks of makeup. Last year I had to have a serious conversation with my girls about bra straps and cleavage; at the same time they were carrying Beanie Babies with them everywhere.

They surprise me; they always surprise me, which is something prospective teachers might think about. Are they interested in being stimulated in this way? I am. I hope it's one of the things that keeps my teaching fresh. I could never be a full-time teacher of adults because I would so much miss the pleasure and beauty of the surprises.

Because we are both in private liberal arts institutions that do not offer graduate courses in our particular programs, we most often teach undergraduate courses to young college students that are fresh out of high school.

Are you mentoring student teachers?

Yes, we spend a lot of time in various schools. Many of our students are between the ages of 19 and 21, and we really like the fact that we are in and out of schools across the grade levels.

At Capital University, where I've taught for the last 12 years, I've directed a project called "Project Party." It stands for "Participate Actively in Reading Throughout the Year." It's a motivational literacy program for children who have been nominated by their teachers as reluctant to read and write but who are welcomed and receive a scholarship to come to college to be readers and writers. It's never presented in a remedial way. Occasionally I'll get a phone call when the child and the parent receive the invitation to P.A.R.T.Y. and notice that they've been nominated to receive a scholarship. The student will say, "About this letter. I don't know why I got it. My mom's not home from work yet but I want you to know I'm coming."

How many kids?

We keep it small, about 20 young people. Each one is matched with an adult who just likes to read and write and agrees for a period of a year to stay in touch by phone or by postcard or by going to bookstores on a monthly basis. Some of the connections have lasted for years. They're truly just literate friendships with no expectations. We look for indicators of a positive attitude toward reading and writing in one of three venues — in the children's personal life, in their community life, and in school with the understanding that it may not change in school. We are pleased if they see themselves as readers and writers.

Kids need to know that literate grown-ups read themselves to sleep at night, or they carry books with them, or they find and savor moments in their lives when they can read.

You know there are lots of kids who are good readers who don't see themselves as good readers in school. In school they're performing the reading tasks, and at home they're reading books and loving literature.

As a part of "Right to Read" week, I gave a talk one time in a middle school. I was asked to talk about how in my work I use reading and writing. There were a whole variety of things that were part of my conversation with the students. Afterwards I received thank-you notes, and one has really stuck with me. A young man wrote several things about thanking me for coming and chose to end his note with "P.S. I hate reading, but I love books." Unfortunately, for him, reading was what it can be in school sometimes. Reading to him was not the same thing as what he really enjoyed when he was away from the school classroom with a book. What is so wonderful, Nancie, is that you bring the two together.

How those stories sustain us. One that stays in my mind is the student who told me that she always knew there had to be something that people got out of reading and writing, but she just hadn't been able to figure out what it was until she read *After the Rain* by Norma Fox Mazer.

That is such a good book about connections between the generations. The thing that's endlessly fascinating is you never know what the one good book will be that convinces kids reading is something they want to do their whole lives. It only takes one good

book to make a reader, and what a thrill it is for a teacher to be the one who puts that book into a child's hands.

*There's so much pressure now — even more, I think, than when *In the Middle* was first published — for the prescribed reading lists. Do you have words for teachers as ways that they can have lots of worthwhile books in the classroom and even suggested readings for the students in the summer without actually doing a prescribed reading list?*

I've made photocopies of an appendix from *In the Middle* for my kids because it's a list of books that previous students have loved. Then, in the two years since I wrote the second edition, there have been probably another hundred books we found that they love as well, so I just keep revising the list. And it seems to me that it's a pretty rich banquet, in terms of the range of literature. I've had kids who adore *Animal Farm* and *Lord of the Flies* and *The Great Gatsby*, which are books that are often prescribed. I think again it's important to give kids choice — to say of any list, "Here's a range of books that people have said are really good literature, kids and grown-ups, and you're free to graze here." This is the best way to approach prescribed lists.

And the other thing is the students in classrooms such as yours — and I don't like it that so often the emphasis comes back to this issue — but they do as well or better on the mandated tests. Unfortunately, our pressure in Ohio is increasing as the standards are going to be raised for what will be acceptable scores on the tests at a variety of grade levels. Teachers and administrators at many schools are very concerned about how their high school students are going to do. I think a lot of the success or failure is going to reflect what happens in the middle school years when there is such a transition in approaches to reading and writing.

When you're looking at situations where reading consists of assigned whole-class novels, and students may read three books in a year, how does an experience like that prepare anyone not only to do well on a reading test, but to be fully literate for the rest of his or her life? I think one of the ways we prepare kids for the tests is by giving over regular class time for kids to read. I also think we need to make independent reading a regular homework assignment — at least half an hour a night. Kids need to know that literate grown-ups read themselves to sleep at night, or they carry books with them, or they find and savor moments in their lives when they can read. My students read about 25 books a year, and that seems to be the best preparation in terms of what kids can do to reach those levels as read-

ers. Although my students will go to good high schools, they'll mostly go right back into the syndrome of three books a year. And while they're very good books, it ignores what the possibilities are for kids as readers.

I also think that we need to acknowledge that reading a lot is just one part of it. So is talking to somebody about what you've read. A lot of the tests ask kids to respond to literature in open-ended ways. Unless there are mechanisms in place for kids either to write informally in response to what they're reading — like the reading journals my kids and I keep — or to talk with people about what they're reading, students seldom do more than eat and digest a book. They need opportunities to sit back and savor the aftertaste, to think and talk about what it means, then begin to make connections to other works of literature. So three things have to be in place: lots of books, time to read them that's mandated and encouraged and provided in the classroom, and response — ways to talk with somebody else and articulate your thinking.

I think what hurt some programs where teachers realized the importance of students having choice and doing a lot of individual reading was that they stopped teaching. There wasn't the kind of discussion you're talking about and the expectations to dig back into the book to clarify and extend meaning.

We've merely created a different kind of study hall if there aren't interactions around the literature.

I think some people, who don't understand what can happen in a literacy workshop, are not aware of the rigor and expectations involved in it. Is this an aspect of workshop that you'd like to talk about? You've touched on it in several things you've said today, but will you comment about how the program is a rigorous one in which students can succeed and continue on.

Our students at CTL, who come from 23 different communities, leave us at the end of eighth grade and go into many kinds of secondary situations. Some of them will enter the local high school in their own small town, and others have gone, for example, to St. Paul's or Phillips Exeter. They have done extraordinarily well. They're honors students across the subject areas, and it's because they're able to do the things that good readers do. They can pose questions and read for information; they can write quickly and well; they can conduct research, which is a skill needed in every subject area; and they know literature. The mom of a boy at a private school this year told me yesterday that the English teacher was asking the kids in this class what poets they'd like to read this year, and Ethan would not stop talking. "Well, I'd like to read Edwin Arlington

Robinson, and I really like Richard Wilbur, and I'd like to do some more William Stafford. I've read a lot of Frost, but I wouldn't mind going back. I definitely like e. e. cummings, Langston Hughes . . ." The other kids in the class just sat there. Ethan had an agenda as a reader of poetry because we read and talk about a poem every day at the beginning of class. He met all the great poets. He adored William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens was his particular favorite. So he'll carry that with him. I don't know if that's rigor or if that's just me in a panic saying, "I only have 175 days. I have to introduce them to everything that's out there that's great and has made me happy." The hard question is, how do I talk about Wallace Stevens so that Ethan might take a piece of Stevens into himself and carry that with him when he goes off into the world? "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a great place to start.

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It seems that rigor may come from there being no down time. In many classrooms there's a tremendous amount of lost time, a waiting for something important to happen. It seems to me as a teacher you must not wait for important things to happen.

I have such guilt about time wasting. I'm very aware of the preciousness of the 175 days. Am I doing enough? Looking and listening hard enough? How do we make every day count? Every day.

Something that you said at the very beginning of this interview was that you find yourself thinking about "What's the very best thing I can do tomorrow?" And in colleges of education we sometimes tell our students, "You shouldn't be thinking the night before about what you're going to do the next day. You should have everything planned out well in advance."

In my latest approach to planning, I tentatively plan on the weekend for Monday and Tuesday, and that's really the best I can do. Even by Tuesday things might

have changed. Then I plan the rest of the week from there. But I also have by this time in my career the most incredibly exhaustive filing system of stuff that I know I want to introduce to kids at some point. So I have files about the apostrophe, techniques for writing fiction, Emily Dickinson's poetry, writing contests my kids should know about. I mean there are files and files and files, both the ones that fill drawers and the ones I'm carrying in my head, when I'm mulling over what's the next best thing to do or where we go next with literature, or how do I start teaching about punctuation? Do I start by talking about the history of punctuation marks? And then, what marks and rules are worth teaching? These kinds of questions are the interesting ones; they're a little more philosophical. The other kind of planning comes in direct response to what's happening with my kids.

I'll digress for a moment. Another reason I love to teach seventh and eighth grade is that they so love satire. There's a pseudonymous writer named Ted L. Nancy who compiles these *Letters from a Nut*. He writes insane letters to corporations and institutions across the country, with absolutely silly requests. I promise if you open this book in a bookstore, you will stand there laughing till you cry. My boys adore this guy, and on Friday three kids were trying to write their own versions of letters from nuts, but, without a clue about how to set up a business letter. So on Monday, that's my mini-lesson: how to set up a business letter. The kids take notes during mini-lessons, something I learned from Linda Rief. Everyone will write a mock business letter in his or her notebook, with the heading, the inside address, a colon after the greeting, the interior margins the way they're supposed to be. It will be used as a reference: the rest of the year, every time they write a business letter, they'll have the format. I know I was still looking up business letter form until I was 35, so it's a useful thing for kids to have at their fingertips. That's the responsive piece, which is recognizing that my students need to know about business letters and I should teach this now, while I've got kids who are struggling with it, as opposed to teaching it many times in individual conferences.

I know you've had them keep notes in a variety of formats. Will their notes be in a literature log or is everything together in one notebook?

There are several notebooks. In one they're writing letters back and forth to me and each other about their reading. For these they use marble composition notebooks with the pages sewn in, because these are handled a lot. They also have spiral notebooks for notes on mini-lessons and for their personal notes about

writing territories, and their brainstorming lists. For example, an assignment last week was to answer a series of questions I'd posed to help each writer uncover memoir-worthy experiences — experiences that might show something about who they are and who they might become. That list is something that will go in the front of the notebook, in the writing territories section. The table of contents last year listed 70 or more pages of information that kids had recorded about mini-lessons, as well as prompted responses to literature, for example responses kids wrote this week to *Hamlet*.

Do they just keep the table of contents going?

Yes, every two months as a homework assignment on the weekend I'll ask them to go back in and update. I know that when my kids go to high school, many take these notes with them.

This example is one reason Donald Graves has said you are so well organized.

I've come to think of organization as a vehicle toward being able to do good work. I wouldn't say organization is the goal. I'd say it's getting things in place so that you can do your best work.

In one of our previous issues, we used the theme "Teaching in the Midst of Chaos." We have had fun with this whole idea of how what first appears as chaos can have a lot of pattern to it. There's a lot of predictability and structure in your classroom.

The theme of this issue is "Teaching is . . . Looking Back, Peering Forward, Making Choices." I know you stressed that the first week of school sets the tone — the first impressions are so important — for teachers who feel the urge to change the way they teach, whether they've been teaching from behind the desk or whatever it is and would like to come closer to doing the kind of teaching we've been talking about today. How do they change midstream?

I'm somebody who changed midstream. In 1980 I closed my classroom door and told my kids, "I've heard about this work" — it was Donald Graves' study at Atkinson — "and I think I may have been short-changing you." It seems there are other possibilities for writers and readers in school that look a lot more like what people actually do as writers and readers outside of school." I described the Atkinson writing workshops and asked, "Does this sound like something we want to do?" Every kid in every class said, "Oh, yes, yes." I think a way to change is to acknowledge to kids that this is something you've been reading about and that seems logical, sensible, and satisfying. Then invite them in.

Neat idea. Good way to do it. A good way to give yourself the courage to change.

At one point in NCTE, I heard you talk about how you all of a sudden thought, "Oh my goodness, I have made a certain way of teaching almost into another . . ."

Orthodoxy. I don't ever mean to imply that good teachers have to be parents, but I think becoming a parent helped me grow in a way that I needed to, in terms of helping me understand how I could be more responsible. I'm very aware of the kind of grown-up I want my daughter to become, so I think differently about my students, too. How do I act responsibly toward them as a writing and reading teacher — not as the adult who prepares dinner and makes sure they get all their food groups, but as the grown-up who makes sure they have the best possible grounding in writing and reading? How do I interact with them if I'm taking on an authoritative role as this kind of grown-up? I'm more directive than I was but also, in the end, more helpful to my kids. It's interesting to think about the model of conferring that originally attached itself to writing workshop. By that I mean the idea of asking open-ended, leading questions but never telling kids what they should try in their writing, never telling them the problems you see, never writing on their writing. This approach is not in Don's research, but it certainly attached itself to workshop; I'm one of the people who helped that happen. It's almost like pop psychology somehow got mixed up with models for conversations between kids and teachers.

The idea that you as teacher must not get in their way. You have talked about the fact that now you don't hesitate to write on a student's page — to intervene.

Absolutely not, if it will help them for me to demonstrate a solution. And again, it's because I'm a grown-up who has had all these experiences and can show kids how to achieve the effects they're after.

Exactly. The students want their teachers to teach. It's needed.

Let me say I'd hesitate to write on an adult's paper. If I were conferring with you, if you and I were looking at a piece of your writing, I would definitely have a face-to-face conference with you and then send you off to take care of business. But my students are 11 to 14. They're children, and they don't have the knowledge or experience to take care of business on their own — not just in writing, but in life. I think the approaches we take when we teach them are necessarily different from the ways we talk to adults. You can't be distant and philosophical with kids. You have to get right in there with them.

From my perspective in the undergraduate college classroom, my students want the direct — they want me to teach in some observable fashions; in fact, to the point that they have assured me they'd like to see a lot of writing in response to their work. They like to know that I've been at my kitchen table with their work and that a lot of my thinking shows up on their papers. But again, I think it's because I'm still the teacher.

One of the things that you wrote about in Coming to Know, and I'm assuming that you have done this in leading your school, is the emphasis on using a lot of reading and writing to learn across the content areas.

I also teach history. The science and history curricula at our school consist of K-8 topics: everybody studies the same thing for a whole year. In history this year, the concept is "Making a Nation" — taking us from the early English colonists through the writing of the Constitution — that particular chunk of American history. Everybody engages together, and there's a tremendous amount of reading, writing, field trips, informal writing, reports, acting, script writing, role-plays, projects, and collaboration between groups. This week my kids formed advertising design teams and created campaigns to encourage English citizens of the early 1600s to come to Jamestown, which was a huge failure as a colony initially — eight out of every 10 people who came over died. The students produced very funny skits — a TV commercial, a radio commercial, a huge billboard with lots of funny exaggerations, all trying to get people off the streets of London to come on over. They performed these for an appreciative audience of third, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

There is a tremendous variety of activity, in terms of the writing and the reading we do in history. The kids are also reading Joy Hakim's wonderful book *Making 13 Colonies*, which is part of a 12-volume series from Oxford University Press, and one of the best written for kids about American history. It starts with the first Americans coming across the Bering Strait and goes right through to Bill Clinton. It is engagingly written and thoroughly researched, and there are stunning primary documents embedded in the text. That reading is going on at the same time that we're writing and reading poems about the period. It's well rounded, and it's also collaborative, because older students are working with younger ones. All of it is fueled by writing and reading. The same thing is happening in science, where the theme for the year is "The Working Earth," or geology, and everybody is working together drawing, writing in journals, reading, experimenting, taking field trips, working with guest experts, and investigating together.

We don't have the time now to talk about it, but we know you could teach us all a great deal about curriculum planning. Clearly there's an incredible amount of time devoted to it in your school.

Every Tuesday after school we sit down for two hours to talk about science and history curricula. Everybody is not on the same page, but they're in the same area.

The first question I ask myself, in beginning to investigate a new topic with my kids is, what are the big ideas? What do I want them to understand? And if these are the big ideas, then how do I help kids get at them? What are the resources I can use to get at them?

What is your advice to encourage content area teachers to engage their students in writing for real purposes?

I think it takes almost a rethinking of one's whole approach to history. The first question I ask myself, in beginning to investigate a new topic with my kids, is what are the big ideas? What do I want them to understand? Why were these colonies really formed? What prices were paid, by whom, for their success? Was it a glorious adventure? Or was it a profit venture? Was it to seek religious freedom — or to deny others freedom of religion? And if these are the big ideas, then how do I help kids get at them? What are the resources I can use to get at them?

If a teacher is textbook-driven, I don't know if you can ask such questions, but you need to at least try to step back and ask: What's important? What matters? What are the truths? What are the myths? What are the implications? William Faulkner wrote, "The past is not dead, it's not even past," and I think about that quote every day when I'm teaching, especially American history. In teaching about Jamestown, for example, I need to help kids understand that the reason we have racism in this country today is because the first African slaves were brought to Jamestown in 1619. English gentlemen needed a profitable crop but didn't want to work or couldn't hire enough English workers to harvest tobacco. The only way they were ever going to make Jamestown profitable was to start buying slaves. Then, once tobacco became fashionable in England and there was a steady demand for it, they needed more slaves to keep it going. A new way of life was created that could

only be supported by the labor of slaves, because nobody else would do it, while at the same time the tobacco fields cost the Indians their land and their way of life.

Your passion for history is as strong as for literature. It really is . . . it shows.

Now we must stop, but we want you to know how eager we are to hear you later today as OCTELA's featured speaker. Thank you for coming to Ohio and for having this conversation with us. We are honored. ♦

SELECTED WORKS BY NANCIE ATWELL

In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents, 1987.

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Coming to know: Writing to learn in the intermediate grades, 1990.

Side by side: Essays on teaching to learn, 1991.

ARTICLES

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"Bringing It All Back Home." *The New Advocate*, December 1998.



Teaching Matters!

Tea for Two (and Twenty)

As a culminating activity to the reading of *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, I decided to hold a tea party for the 22 students in my freshman honors English class. The project not only linked the disciplines of language arts and home economics, but provided a form of community service to younger students as well.

After renting a costume from a local shop and getting the superintendent to agree to play the White Rabbit, I then made arrangements with the home economics teacher who viewed the tea party as a means of providing a lesson in social skills.

When students arrived to class that day, I told them that, just like the main character, Alice, they should be prepared for strange things to happen at the tea party and to have fun. They were instructed to find their seats by looking for a place card (an index card with a playing card attached). The White

Rabbit made a surprise appearance; then we took pictures of individual students and groups. Once students were seated, the home economics teacher shared the proper way to sit, the function and uses of silverware, how to unfold a napkin, pass food (which consisted of crumb cake and lemon and cherry tarts), and how to indicate when one is finished eating. Proper dishwashing techniques were also discussed, because there were close to 100 pieces of china and silverware to clean following the successful event.

What about the White Rabbit? He changed vests and became the Easter Bunny sharing a huge basket of goodies contributed by my students to give to K-4 elementary students.

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